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Renewal of the CGIAR: The Final Milestone

NARS as a Factor in Priority Setting

Attached is a note on NARS as a Factor in Priority Setting. The note will be introduced by the TAC Chair. We draw your particular attention to the last section of the paper, whereby the views and counsel of the Group are sought on specific issues.

SDR/TAC:IAR/95/19

**CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

NARS AS A FACTOR IN PRIORITY SETTING

TAC SECRETARIAT

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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NARS AS A FACTOR IN PRIORITY SETTING

Introduction

National research systems (NARS) are the principal partners of the Centres in the conduct of their work. While the environment in which both NARS and CGIAR Centres operate is changing rapidly, this note does not deal with the many important and dynamic issues in the relations between IARC's and NARS, such as the declining level of resources available to NARS since the early eighties, the differential strengths of NARS, modalities of partnerships arrangements or the need for strengthening NARS in order for CGIAR Centres to operate efficiently. Rather, the central issue here relates to priority setting.

Partnership

The Lucerne Action Programme encouraged the CGIAR, among other things, to accelerate the process of involving the NARS in setting and implementing the Group's agenda. This formal widening of the partnership audience has important implications for the way TAC and the CGIAR as a whole conducts its business, now and in the future. Currently there is no comprehensive statement of CGIAR policy on the relationships between CGIAR Centres and the national research systems. TAC welcomed the IFAD initiative in convening an "International Consultation on the NARS Vision of International Agricultural Research" and actively participated in the consultations held in Rome, December 1994 and in Nairobi, May 1995. The recommendations from that meeting are now being implemented through the development of an "Action Plan to Strengthen NARS-CGIAR Partnership." The Committee strongly supports the momentum underway in preparing this Action Plan.

TAC-NARS Dialogue: TAC schedules four out of six of its regular committee meetings over a two-year cycle at locations (normally CGIAR Centres) in the regions. The principal reasons for this are to enhance TAC's understanding of the work of the Centres and to facilitate regular consultations with NARS' representatives from the particular region. To date, TAC has met with NARS' representatives from Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America in conjunction with TAC 64 (Côte d'Ivoire) and TAC 66 (Peru) meetings, respectively. Plans are in train for further meetings with NARS from Sub-Saharan Africa, WANA, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean in conjunction with TAC 68 (Nairobi, December 1995) and TAC 69 (Manila, March 1996). The December and March interactions will focus on priority setting and are especially timely, because during TAC 68 and 69 the Committee's views on CGIAR Priorities and Strategies will be formulated.

Priority Setting

Priority setting within the CGIAR occurs at several levels. The Group identifies the System's overarching goals. The governance and management of the CGIAR Centres decide on the specific research programmes, usually with a strong input from the relevant NARS in their constituencies. TAC advises on priorities and resource allocations across

the System's major activities. To date, the NARS have contributed to agenda-setting at all three levels. TAC welcomes a broader dialogue with NARS on priority setting in the context of the consultations currently underway in the System.

Nature of NARS and CGIAR Research

It is frequently said that, in the interest of efficiency, the CGIAR Centres should move upstream in their research while some portion of their current work should be undertaken by NARS. It should be noted that Centres are continuously "moving upstream," driven by opportunities from advances in science which ensure that yesterday's strategic research will become tomorrow's applied research. It is also true that some portion of that applied research will be taken up by NARS just as it is true that some NARS pursue strategic research and, indeed, basic research. Shifts in research activities, then, occur as a natural part of this process.

But, the more interesting question relates to NARS undertaking *international public goods research* that is now in the CGIAR portfolio. This strategy has been discussed for many years, and there should be little doubt that some NARS have the capacity to effectively handle some tasks now performed by the CGIAR, if additional funds (e.g., from centre budgets) could be made available for this purpose. There is, however, a side to the strategy that has been little discussed and that relates to the kinds of assurances other NARS would want before relying on a sister NARS for important public goods now being provided by the CGIAR. These assurances relate to the reliability of continuing national support, evenhandedness in delivering products, and the potential influence of changes in a nation's foreign policy. Where such considerations are of consequence, they will limit the extent to which the gains from international public goods investments can be realized through national programs. TAC notes, however, that the emerging regional organizations will provide lower risk strategies for such arrangements.

Institution Strengthening

The 1992 Review of CGIAR Priorities and Strategies identified: *strengthened human resources and institutions for greater research capacity in developing countries' research systems* as one of the CGIAR's important aims. The diversity of NARS raises issues in the area of institution strengthening. The CGIAR may need a strategy to relate to the different systems, particularly the private sector elements. An issue for the Centres is how to set priorities and balance their support to the much broader and heterogeneous set of bodies comprising the new NARS. It will be advantageous to identify the kinds of interventions the Centres can make and which elements of the NARS can be targeted with greatest effect or with least cost. Given the Centres' more diversified research portfolios, it will also be advantageous to choose which components of their programmes to extend to other partners.

Concluding Comments

The foregoing discussion has raised issues which may have significant policy and resource implications for the CGIAR. As TAC pursues its discussion on the next round

of CGIAR priorities and strategies it must necessarily address the issue of resource allocation to institution strengthening relative to the other programme activities, in the context of how an improved division of labour and responsibilities between the Centres, NARS, and other suppliers can be most efficiently realised. This poses challenging choices.

On the one hand, TAC is mindful of the discussions on institution strengthening in the 1992 Priorities and Strategies exercise when it noted "*that the CGIAR centres should make their main contribution to strengthening national research systems through scientific collaboration and by providing the outputs of their work in the form of information and improved genetic material*". The Group also endorsed TACs recommendation that the overall proportion of CGIAR activities in the category of institution building should be reduced from 24 percent to somewhere between 19 to 21 percent, with less emphasis on training, information and capacity building networks and greater emphasis on organization/management counselling activities.

On the other hand, TAC is conscious of the reality that the capacity of many NARS is still limited by inadequacies of: (a) funding for operations and physical capital, (b) management structures, (c) incentive systems, and (d) human capital. It also recognizes that the development assistance community provides extensive financial and technical assistance to NARS in a number of different ways with the CGIAR centres representing but one small part of the resources involved. TAC is also aware of the limitations of generalisations and the need to strengthen institution building activities in fields that have received relatively little attention, such as forestry, fisheries and food policy. Finally, TAC is aware that the Group encourages the transfer of research activities from the Centres to NARS when such transfers realize a greater overall efficiency and have good probability of a successful outcome in terms of NARS capacity (supply side) and NARS receptiveness (demand side).

TAC uses this opportunity to express its current thinking on these issues:

1. Given the current support available from other sources for institution strengthening activities, TAC considers that the CGIAR should continue to emphasize the strengthening of NARS principally through collaborative research, access to its research products, and research management support.
2. TAC understands that the priority assigned to CGIAR institution strengthening activities should be anchored on the Group's goals of improving food security through poverty alleviation and conserving natural resources.
3. Whereas, through its external reviews, priority setting and resource allocation processes, TAC will continue to examine opportunities to effectively transfer research activities of an international public goods nature from the CGIAR centres to NARS, the Committee sees the ultimate responsibility for such decisions resting with the Centres as an ongoing part of their responsibility to ensure an efficient use of the System's resources.

TAC will further consider the technical dimensions of these issues at TAC 68 in its discussion on the recently commissioned study entitled, *The future role of the CGIAR in development of National Agricultural Research Systems: A Strategic Study of Institution-Strengthening Research and Services*.

The Committee looks forward to the Groups views and counsel on these issues.